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Marginal Christian Spirituality: An Example from a Dutch Meditation Group

PETER G. A. VERSTEEG

ABSTRACT Spirituality is one of the forms of religion that seems to thrive in secularised Western societies. It has become an umbrella term for a variety of experience-oriented religious practices in Western societies. The popularity of spirituality is clearly visible within Christian settings, both inside and outside churches. This paper explores the nature of 'marginal' Christian spirituality, i.e. Christian spirituality outside the churches, through a case study of a meditation group in a Dutch spiritual centre founded by Jesuits. It will be shown how meditation as a free experiential space stimulates the diversity of individual meanings, both traditional and alternative. Hence, meditation in this case is a method which affirms religious individuality.

Exercise

I am the stream
And I flow beyond myself
I am the river
And I pour myself into the sea
I am the sea
And I evaporate into nothing
I am the cloud
And I am losing my hold
In rain and snow
My form fragments
Who can love me
When I appear and disappear
Again and again

You are water, says the water
Water, my child, you are me
Whether ice or fog
You are me
Love yourself, then you love me
And everywhere you are safe in me.

(Visser 1)¹

Introduction

The above text from the Dutch spiritual author Catharina Visser takes the reader through a fluid reality, a life without fixed form, which is, at the same time, a reality and a life in which belonging is a possibility. Losing one's hold and flowing into different forms brings loneliness and a desire to be loved. Yet in the end, there is the comfort of connectedness when we look into ourselves and discover that the whole is our mirror image which enfolds us. This text contains some important themes that are current in contemporary spirituality: the experience and questioning of the fragmentation of life, a desire for belonging and a holistic union. The form of the text is exemplary for the kind of meditative reading and reflection in spirituality, inviting people to experience love, safety, and wholeness.²

The text is published in the newsletter of Dabar, a Christian commune and publisher of Christian spiritual books, and therefore seems to be directed to people with a Christian orientation. Yet the poem communicates a rather inclusive spirituality, which seemingly appeals to people with different worldviews. How should we understand its meaning, since there is nothing explicitly Christian about it? If this text is in a way exemplary for Christian spirituality, what does this say about contemporary Christian experience?

In this article, I will describe the development of Christian spirituality in the Netherlands as a form of contemporary experiential religion. The specific focus is on 'non-institutional' Christian spirituality, as it can be found in Christian spiritual centres. Firstly, I will introduce Christian spirituality and give an interpretation of it in relation to a wider social and religious context. Secondly, I will focus on spiritual practices in Christian spiritual centres through a case illustration of a meditation group, meditation being one of the prominent techniques of experience in spirituality. Finally, I will conclude with some thoughts about the implications of new Christian spirituality for the development of Christian religion in the Netherlands.³

Christian Spirituality

Spirituality is now one of the popular buzzwords in Christianity in the Netherlands. Numerous books have been published on the subject (e.g. Beumer; Blommestijn; Burggraaff; De Groot; Nouwen; Sonnen), including scholarly (Waaijman) and popular theological work (Bouwman and Bras). Parts of the mainline Protestant churches seem to become favourable to spiritual practices in liturgy and private contemplation (see e.g. Van den Berg and Van Cuilenburg). Recently, the Radboud University of Nijmegen, formerly a Catholic university, started a Master's degree in spirituality. Similar to its alternative counterparts, Christian spirituality has also reached the world of management and organisations (Hoefman). One of the most striking developments, however, is the growth of Christian spirituality outside churches and institutional control.

The popularity of spirituality signifies a much broader experiential trend in Christianity that redefines what it means to be a Christian believer. We could mention here, for example, the growing influence of evangelicalism, Taizé singing, monastery retreats, and the interest in devotional space and objects.

These forms all have in common that they see belief in terms of the individual experience of the sacred rather than in terms of the adherence to a particular tradition carried by a community of believers. This also means that individual experience and the traditional context of experience have become separated; experience is no longer solely defined and evaluated within this context, but potentially shaped through different cultural and religious influences, following individual preferences and life-styles. People will look for different providers of meaning that will help them facilitate their experience. Within this field, Christian spiritual centres play the role of providers and facilitators.

The emergence of spirituality is related to major changes in Western society since the 1960s, which are often summarised under the label of secularisation. Secularisation theories have often emphasised processes of church decline and the gradual disappearance of religion from the public domain. Another interesting aspect of secularisation is the process of detraditionalisation, which means the loss of authority of traditions. In the case of religious traditions, this leads to disembedding beliefs from traditional discourses. Beliefs become clustered in repertoires from which individuals may draw and compose their meanings or, even more systematic, their worldviews. The options from which individuals may choose are thus varied, yet this 'pick-and-choose' approach often has a logic and people are less flexible than it may seem. This logic means foremost that people take an inductive experiential stance towards religious meaning (see Berger). Religious affirmation no longer follows the logic of tradition, but takes personal experience as the way to knowledge and even truth. This shift from tradition to personal experience means a transformation of the religious landscape, including traditional Christianity (Heelas, "Spiritual Revolution"; Heelas and Woodhead).

Seen in a Christian context, spirituality seems to appeal to a relativist idea of individual religious feelings as the inner core of religious tradition. Similarly, spirituality has become part of a theological discourse which presents spirituality in relation to the modern crisis of rationalisation, social fragmentation, and deprivation of meaning (see Aalders; Layendecker; Bras "Spiritualiteit"). In some sense, the current popularity of spirituality is the theological acknowledgement that tradition has lost, but perhaps that experience is winning new 'believers'. However, experience is always socially shaped; it is not a pure essence that is left after tradition has disappeared. Not only will tradition leave its mark on a particular way of experiencing, but new structures of experience will arise as well. However, the fact that authority has shifted from tradition to the individual makes it difficult to give a general outline of what this experience looks like in the context of Christian spirituality. For example, a provisional definition of spirituality as "a praxis in which a relationship with God/the divine is maintained that changes you" (Bras, "Wat is spiritualiteit" 13) may include Calvinist Pietism, the Ignatian method, Theresa of Avila's mysticism, and psychic Spirit-healing—religious practices that see the nature of spiritual experience in relation to the divine quite differently.⁴ What is called 'spirituality' should often be understood in the plural sense.

However, within the variety of spiritualities, a common orientation may be discovered. In this respect, it is worthwhile to follow Woodhead and Heelas in *Religion in Modern Times*, who distinguish three major streams of contemporary

religiosity. Firstly, there are 'religions of difference'. Religions of difference, e.g. traditional or conservative Christianity, see a sharp division between sacred, human, and nature. Authority is ascribed to the sacred which has to reveal itself in order to redeem humans. Sacred texts, rituals, and offices represent the authority of the transcendent. Some religions of difference emphasise religious experience as a source of authority as well, most notably churches of the evangelical and Pentecostal type. Secondly, 'religions of humanity' or liberal religions do not regard sacred, human, and nature as strictly divided, but see them in partnership. Religions of humanity, e.g. liberal Christianity, are strongly related to Enlightenment ideals and place a high value on reason. Human nature and experience are often portrayed as the starting point to know the sacred. Other religious strands of this type, however, have been influenced by Romanticism and have a stronger experiential orientation (Woodhead and Heelas 70). Thirdly, 'spiritualities of life' can be distinguished, which see human, divine, and nature as closely related and interdependent. Life-spiritualities, with New Age as its most articulated form, look for the divine immanence in life and seek connections to a meaningful and sacred whole. Life-spiritualities emphasise the authority of individual experience; traditions are relative to it (see Heelas, "Spiritual Revolution").

This typology makes it possible to distinguish between Christian spiritualities. Important here is the way in which authority, experience, the sacred, and the self are represented. I suggest that Christian spirituality is closer to life-spiritualities, although some forms will emphasise supra-individual authority as well, for example, by stating that experience has to be formed and evaluated through Scripture. A combination with a religion of humanity is also likely, particularly in progressive Christianity where a former social-political discourse is compensated or replaced by a growing interest in spirituality. In general, however, most forms of Christian spirituality seem to give primacy to the authority of the self. Christian spiritualities stress holistic relationship rather than transcendent revelation and the suggestion that God and the emotional-sensuous self are identical is sometimes strong (see Grün, *God ervaren*). There may be a transcendent reality which transforms the self, but the self is foremost transformed from within. Traditions are certainly relevant, but they are treated as resources from which the individual seeker may draw inspiration. Experience is the path and method to explore these resources and the self is both the subject and the object of this exploration. The popularity of Christian mysticism, interpreted as religious individualism *avant la lettre*, is telling in this respect. Christian spirituality is perhaps best described as a 'spirituality from below', a spiritual method that sees the inner self with its traumas, desires, and weaknesses as the meeting place of the sacred (Grün and Dufner; Grün *De hemel*; see also Grün *Heaven Begins*). Whereas 'spirituality from above', a path of spiritual improvement and achievement, leads to self-coercion through an identification with religious ideals, 'spirituality from below' preaches an attitude of 'acceptance' and 'letting go'. Clearly, 'spirituality from below' has therapeutic overtones and offers methods to transform and affirm the self, but also to cope with the reality of everyday life. In Christian spiritual centres in particular, this kind of holistic self-spirituality seems prominent, which I will illustrate in the next section.

Christian Spiritual Centres

The term 'non-institutional Christian spirituality' does not imply that this form of religiosity has no institutional form at all, but that it is relatively marginal to, and independent of, the church institutions. It is marginal in the sense that it is largely outside these institutions, often consciously positioning itself towards it. Victor Turner (128) has stated that the margin is often a position of experiment *vis-à-vis* an established social structure and it is this experimental nature that becomes visible in the ideological and institutional marginality of Christian spiritual centres. The field of this type of Christian spirituality is a network of spiritual trainers, counsellors, and teachers, and, most notably, spiritual centres. Another aspect which distinguishes these providers of spirituality from the churches is their more outspoken market-orientation, seeing their *clientèle* in terms of interested individuals rather than a community of believers. In particular, Christian spiritual centres are in many ways close to the market of alternative spiritual centres, offering courses, retreats, and other activities to a diverse audience of consumers. A number of Christian spiritual centres also advertise in the monthly agenda of the alternative spiritual magazine *Koördanser*. Approximately 20 centres of varying size can be counted in the Netherlands and some centres attract relatively large numbers of people.⁵ Interestingly, most spiritual centres have a Catholic background and are often aligned to Catholic orders or congregations. The exception is De Spil, a retreat centre with an ecumenical-Protestant orientation and evangelical influences. A more recent development is a Catholic parish in The Hague which has transformed itself into a spiritual centre.

The prominent role of orders and congregations in the Christian spiritual field can be explained as the result of a reformulation of their mission and ministry, partly as a reaction to declining membership and a decrease of callings to the religious life since the 1960s. This new mission meant that orders had to be better able to connect to the people and thereby seek ways to transmit their specific traditions to future generations. The development of spiritual centres seemed to fit this objective and it shows continuity with the catechetical and pastoral core 'business' of some orders and congregations. Although Christian spiritual centres are inspired by their respective spiritual traditions, the interpretation of it is rather liberal and ecumenical, with a focus on the subjective needs of individual seekers and an openness to various worldviews.⁶ This is a major shift from the traditional spirituality of Catholic orders, which was understood as a religious life in relationship to an external sacred within the boundaries of a specific tradition (cf. Heelas and Woodhead 5–6).

Most centre participants are between 55 and 70 years old, are predominantly female, and have received a higher education. Most have a Catholic background; some are still committed to a local parish, some are critical on/off members, others left the church long ago. Small numbers of former Catholics who consider returning or who have returned to the church can also be encountered in Christian spiritual centres. Although young people are a minority in this context, some centres see them as an explicit target group and have developed specific programmes.⁷

The main objective of spiritual centres is to enable people to develop a personal spirituality. As was said earlier, Christian spiritual centres focus on individual

consumers and this determines the way in which they present spirituality. For example, a recent programme brochure of the Han Fortmann centre in Nijmegen states that spirituality “stands for the personal quest that each human being makes to appropriate those human values that s/he deems essential to his life”. That spirituality is first of all portrayed as a personal quest shows that the individual is seen as the point of reference and that anything that s/he may find on his/her path is relative to his/her personal questions and preferences. The boundaries of this quest do not seem to be determined by what is at the end of it (redemption), nor a specific intention (penitence) or a specific road (tradition); the new Christian spiritual traveller inhabits a different world compared to Christian ‘pilgrims’ in a not so distant past. The central focus of spiritual centres on the quest of individual meaning shows that they respond more positively to the crisis of modernity, stressing that the sources of inspiration are still open to all people. In this respect, the process of individualism is even portrayed as favourable to the religious liberation of people, which reflects the marginal and critical position of spiritual centres in relation to religious institutions. Liberation should thus also be understood as healing from religious traumas. As the director of a spiritual centre stated: “A lot of our visitors have suffered from the church.” What is meaningful is not prescribed by the church, but is for the individual to discover. An internal note from the Franciscan centre La Verna states that spirituality should start with “the self-experience of people” asking “how can we experience the depths that we may call God, which concern the self, the relationship with God, the relationship with the other, our own roots [and] ancestors?”. The quote shows that the ‘self-experience’ is in fact seen as embedded in a wider complex of relations and representations, a view which has the characteristics of a worldview or a life-orientation. Experience is not treated as a free-floating moment, but seen as a particular form of consciousness that is related to both the sacred and the social. Not surprisingly, courses in spiritual centres make use of a number of techniques to facilitate this experience: sacred dance, creativity, and meditation.

Meditation in the Ignatiushuis, Amsterdam

The meditation group meets every Tuesday morning in the Ignatiushuis (IH) in Amsterdam. The IH was founded in 1985 by Amsterdam Jesuits who wished to develop it into a training centre for parish volunteers in the Amsterdam area. Although the IH did not succeed in relating to this group, other people were attracted to the IH program. This caused the IH management to change gradually the objective of the centre so that it became a spiritual centre for a more diverse and less church-oriented audience. Until recently, the IH had some communal aspects, organising meditative, Eucharistic, and even Baptism services, but the current focus of the centre has gradually shifted to individuals with an interest in spiritual matters. The IH now refers to itself as ‘ecumenical-Christian’ rather than Jesuit. The programme of the centre is in the hands of a small group of staff, headed by a Jesuit and a Reformed woman minister, and several freelance specialists. The programme clusters around several core themes: psychology;

mysticism; prayer and meditation; the Bible; dance and movement; art and literature.⁸ Following the motto of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, to 'find God in all things', the IH wishes to discover signs of God beyond the Catholic tradition or even beyond the Christian tradition. This explorative inclusiveness is reflected in the programme, which includes influences from various worldviews ranging from the Kaballah to Thomas à Kempis to psychosynthesis. Inclusiveness is also expressed in the Tuesday morning meditation group.

The IH meditation group has been in existence since the centre started. A few volunteers, including two Jesuits, take turns in leading the meetings. About 15 people participate, although at times the number of visitors rises to 20. Some of the regular participants have meditated in this group since it started. Women outnumber men; every week, four or five male participants visit the group. The majority of participants is over 60 years of age and has received middle to high education. Participants have different motivations to participate in the group. Some have a clear religious motivation, seeing participation in terms of a more immediate experience of God; others have a more reflexive motivation, stressing the idea of meditation as taking time to discover 'what is inside yourself'. These mixed motivations do not always make it easy to please every participant in the group.

In the Jesuit tradition, meditation takes an important place. The Ignatian method, also called 'discursive meditation', sees meditation in terms of a reflective encounter with God through Scripture, which leads to personal change. Although the focus is not necessarily on God and Scripture, the structure of the Ignatian method is still present in the idea that meditation is focused on a text as an object of reflection. The meditation is also goal-oriented, as one of the Jesuit meditation leaders explains: "The purpose is to help people cope better with their lives, on the basis of the Gospel. Although not everybody [in the group] uses texts from the Gospel." Texts for meditation may include work by Dag Hammarskjöld, Nelson Mandela or the popular Dutch hymn writer Huub Oosterhuis. Sometimes liturgical texts are used.

Meditation takes place in the chapel of the IH. Participants sit on chairs or meditation benches. Meditation is preceded by physical and relaxation exercises. After the text is read, reflection is encouraged by focusing on certain elements in the text, on which the leader elaborates. This is followed by a period of silence, which may last for 15–20 minutes. The meditation is then closed and participants are invited to share their experiences. After the meeting, there is an opportunity to drink coffee or tea in the room opposite of the chapel.

Although text repertoires and approaches of meditation leaders may be quite different, themes of meditation show little variation and a pattern of meta-themes, such as peace, wholeness, empowerment, and being connected. World events may become a focus for meditation, as happened in the weeks following 11th September, 2001. Meditation leaders used these events differently, sometimes by focusing on inner peace or bringing peace into our life worlds or even sending world leaders 'peace-energy' through meditation. Remarkable is that the structure of the meetings and the practices used greatly resemble meditation methods used in alternative centres.

To illustrate more directly what happens in these meditation meetings, an extract from my field notes follows:

When I enter the room at 9.55 am, seven people are already present. Soft electronic new age music is playing. While I sit down on a meditation bench, more people enter the room. When we start at 10 am, there are twelve people meditating.

In the middle of the room is a burning candle. Next to it is a tray with glasses of water. The participants are sitting in a circle on benches and chairs, most of them with their eyes closed. As usual, we start with yoga-type physical exercises, synchronising our breath and movement. Participants stretch their arms before their bodies, raise them above their heads, put their hands together and move them down in front of their heads. We end the movement by keeping our hands in front of our chest and turning our palms outwards. The meditation leader comments on this exercise: "Open to the light and take it down with you."

After 10 minutes we sit down and the leader asks us to take a glass of water. She tells us about the Japanese researcher Masaru Emoto who in his "Project of Love and Thanks to Water" purifies water through prayer and meditation (see Hado.net). In this way polluted rivers and lakes can become clean again. The meditation leader heard about the work of Emoto during a retreat led by the British guru Mansukh Patel in Wales. She then asks us to pray over the water: "Take a moment to send your gratitude to the water and then take three sips."

The actual meditation session begins with the reading of a poem by Hein Stufkens, a Dutch poet and alternative spiritual teacher, who in the last years developed a more explicit Christian inspiration. One of his recent books is about the 'seven-fold path' of St. Francis (Stufkens *Het zevenvoudige pad*), which has received positive attention in several Christian spiritual centres. The poem in this session is entitled "To an unwilling prophet", which is from a book inspired by Celtic Christianity. In the text of the poem, several elements from biblical prophet stories are told. I quote the first verse:

May you hear
The voice that calls you
From the dark forests where you hide yourself
May a fire blaze up in your heart
May you go where
The Lord of All will lead you

(Stufkens *Waarvoor*)

The reading of the text is followed by relaxation exercises. The leader asks us to concentrate on our body and to feel where there is tension. "Breathe to where the tension is. Let your breath relieve the tension ... Notice the moment of silence after you breathe out ... This is the moment in which you are one with all things."

The leader begins the meditation: "Do you feel called? ... Or do you hide behind the things that seem more important? ..." She continues with similar reflective questions for a few more minutes and then she reads the poem again, which is followed by 15 minutes of silence. Then she concludes the meditation with a visualisation: "Make a visualisation of a situation from your life. Imagine yourself looking at a television image of a difficult situation ... Put your forefinger and thumb together ... Lift your hands ... and surrender it to heaven ... Put your hands together and receive mercy ... Put your hands down and pour it out over the situation." She mentions that one of the regular group members will soon undergo a medical operation. We do the same visualisation and blessing for the healing of this person. When we have opened our eyes the leader comments: "I notice that this helps. The Lord's Prayer and a 'Hail Mary' help also, but you can pray this way as well. It's the same thing."

After the moment of meditation, people have the opportunity to share their experiences. A woman elaborates on the visualisation and blessing, recognising the similarity with the way she prays the 'Hail Mary': "You mentioned the 'Hail Mary', but when I pray a 'Hail Mary' for someone, I always place that person within a dome of light." The leader affirms this idea. "We are doing the same thing here." Then the woman says that she is a television addict: "I want to collect information, understand things, so that I can pray for them." Two other people thank the leader for the meditation and say that the water blessing ritual 'touched' them. When we move to the coffee room, the leader talks to a male participant, one of the other meditation leaders, who describes himself as a 'mainstream Catholic': "What did you think of it?"—"I'm starting to get used to your new things", he replies with a smile.

Interpretation

The meditation meeting described above is not typical for this group, but expresses the meditation leader's specific approach. The leader, a church-going Catholic, has been involved with the IH since the start of the centre, working as a volunteer on many IH courses. Through her involvement she developed a broad interest in spirituality, which has led to an eclectic complex of ideas that she calls 'my new way of thinking'. For her, this 'new way of thinking' is not so much a combination of practices from different spiritual sources, but a new interpretation of her Catholic belief. Mansukh Patel, leader of the inter-religious World Peace Foundation, plays an important role in her reinterpretation, whom she regards as one of the influences that have renewed and enlightened her faith.⁹ Crucial is that she now understands that all religious traditions carry the Light. For her, purification of water through prayer makes as much sense as participating in Communion. Both practices are grounded in the belief of the presence of a 'universal divine principle', to which people may connect. Moreover, people themselves have the 'divine energy' that naturally connects them to nature and makes them able to change it. The holistic connection is also

present in the way this leader guides and comments on the various exercises. Whereas other meditation leaders in this group see body work and breathing as straightforward methods of relaxation and bodily awareness, she points to the intrinsic religious meaning of movement and breath that are believed to make the participant immediately aware of their relation to the sacred.¹⁰ In her view, this holistic spirituality is a perspective on life, which enables her to reinvent her Catholic faith. Her encounter with alternative ideas of 'energy' and 'different planes of energy', for example, stimulated her interest in protective angels, but also in the possibility of communicating with the dead and seeking their help.

Numerous examples could be given of spirituality being used as a way of reinterpreting Christian praxis, which is one of the reasons why spirituality seems attractive to people from a Christian background. In this case, we see how one of the participants easily follows the leader's identification of a visualisation technique and the praying of the 'Hail Mary'. However, since the stress on individual signification is strong, participants will have their own interpretation of the event. Although not all participants will endorse or appreciate the holistic 'alternative' route which this meditation leader takes, it is certainly striking that there is room in this group for this kind of spiritual approach. This means that spirituality in this meditation group takes an inclusive form. Inclusion here means experimenting with new messages and practices as well as being tolerant to practices that may not appeal to everybody, but which are accepted as helpful to some. It is significant to note that in a lot of Christian spiritual centres, discussions are explicitly discouraged. In order to respect everybody's personal quest, experiences may be expressed, but not questioned by other participants. Although this agreement is mainly an issue of guaranteeing safety and integrity to participants, it perhaps indicates awareness that, when experiences are discussed, this will reveal that participants share very little meaning with each other.¹¹ In this sense, the meditation meeting offers a hermeneutic space in which every participant is able to find his/her meaning. For a number of participants, the meeting contains no central message, but an opportunity to relate personal experiences to words, movement, and, what is even more important, silence.

This brings us to the role of leaders in enabling personal change in meditation participants. From the viewpoint of the leader, there *is* a central message that is communicated and this message is about transformation. Some transformations seem trivial (relaxation), but may have less trivial consequences when the practice is given immediate efficacy (connecting to the sacred). In some exercises, the relief of physical tensions signifies at the same time a direct relief of mental tensions. The actual meditation is a moment of reflection in which people are stimulated to change and 'grow'. Central is the encouragement of an attitude of self-acceptance and acceptance of individual circumstances, which is grounded in the awareness of being loved and wanted by the Light or God. Sometimes, meditation leaders hint at personal problems—albeit never in specific terms—and the individual potential to change. In this case, the calling of every person is central. Participants are asked to search for their calling, to realise that they are called, and to see it as more important than other things in life. However, what this calling means is not specified, but it acquires a certain meaning through the water blessing ritual and the visualised blessing. Participants already take a more

active role in that they themselves bring transformation and healing. Thus in this case, transformation also means bringing mercy and healing to nature and other people.¹²

The example of the meditation leader shows that spiritual experience is an important factor in the redefinition of a personal religious worldview and practice. The idea that experience represents the essence of religion or religions makes it an orientation with which people may easily cross boundaries of traditions and try to find similar experiences, often through experimentation. Experience itself is holistic because it is able to create interdependent relations between different religious repertoires. In this way, a belief in angels may be revitalised through the idea of 'energies' and New Age-type visualisations may become similar to Catholic prayers. Perhaps it is not too speculative to see a sacramental script at work here, a flexible and experiential orientation which regards created reality as sacred. Crucial in this orientation, however, is the notion that experience, self, and others are connected with the whole and are part of the whole. Differentiation between self and sacred clearly does not lead to this kind of holistic spirituality.

The religious option promoted in the IH meditation group can be described as a combination of a religion of humanity and a life-spirituality. The religion of humanity is reflected in the ideal of the liberation of human beings, which is the influence from progressive Dutch Jesuitism as it has transformed and developed after Vatican II. The side of life-spirituality is visible in the transformation and expansion of this liberationist Catholicism, in which liberation is seen foremost as the experience of connectedness between all living beings. In this case, holism seems to form a logical continuity with the sacramental nature of Catholic beliefs. As the example from this meditation group shows, holism certainly is a major orientation in Christian spirituality, but from what we know so far, it is certainly not the only orientation. Even within the small group described above, participants have different motivations to be involved in spirituality. To some, meditation offers the possibility of a more direct experience of God, complementing the Sunday service. To others, meditation is a moment of self-reflection or a kind of quality time for the self. Yet even holistic orientations within Christian spirituality can be different: for instance, whereas some see visualisations as an immediate reality to which one can act upon, others will see it as a helpful channel of the imagination. Similarly, some will frown upon the idea that angels represent entities or energies and will value the angel only as a psychologically relevant symbol. Clearly, distinguishing between orientations within this new religious field requires more research. Nevertheless, the fact that Christian spiritual centres create a space where this diversity comes together is remarkable.

Conclusion

It is clear that the most fundamental change of Christian experience is that experience itself has become the most dominant aspect of religiosity. This also means that the authority to explore and determine religious meaning has shifted to a great extent from tradition to the individual. Today, many experiential alternatives are available within Christianity, inside as well as outside the

churches (Heelas, *New Age Movement* 149). The popularity of spirituality as one of these experiential alternatives can be seen as both a consequence of and a response to religious individualisation and the detraditionalisation of the Christian faith. Spirituality is presented as a way to find the essence of religion, relativising its institutional and communal appearance. Yet spirituality is formed within different contexts and the way in which experience is represented in relation to the sacred and the self is still important. As I have argued, spiritual options can be categorised according to the different emphasis that is placed on experience, the nature of the sacred, and the role of the individual. This reveals a variety of different Christian spiritualities, of which 'non-institutional' Christianity forms an interesting spectrum, in particular Christian spiritual centres.

As the data show, the religious option promoted in the described meditation group is not a pure life-spirituality, but contains aspects of a religion of humanity as well. The group shows some clear characteristics of a life-spirituality, in particular in the holistic method of meditation and approach to the sacred. Interestingly, as this case demonstrates, the Catholic tradition seems favourable to certain aspects of life-spirituality, in the sense that people easily reinterpret their traditional beliefs within a new holistic framework. Perhaps one can speak of an emerging Catholic life-spirituality, which takes sacramentality as its basic repertoire of meaning. Aspects of a religion of humanity, in this case a product of progressive Jesuitism, are still visible in the liberationist ideas which form the inspiration for some of the meditation leaders in particular.

In this 'non-institutional' context, spirituality is seen as a personal quest in which individual self-experience is the starting point. Spiritual centres focus on a market of individual consumers to whom they offer activities to help people develop a personal spirituality. The marginal and critical position of spiritual centres in relation to the churches enhances the role of experience as a way to find personal meaning without institutions. Traditions are deconstructed and used selectively as resources of meaning, whereby experience determines the combination of religious sources. In this respect, meditation, with its lack of boundaries and space for private intentions, seems to be the perfect technique for inclusive experience. In the case of the IH meditation group, I have shown that the experiential orientation is grounded in a holistic view on reality, although most people still interpret it from their Catholic background. This brings Christian spirituality close to the more explicit forms of alternative life-spiritualities and, in some cases, Christian spirituality may just be a variety of that (cf. Kemp). The question whether spirituality is Christian or not may become very relative indeed; the fact that a lot of those who visit Christian spiritual centres see spirituality as an inclusive and open orientation to life without the adjective 'Christian' testifies to this observation. Christian experience is de-centred where it has lost its traditional frames of reference, but not where it is reinterpreted according to a loosely defined set of symbols and role models.

As I have indicated, however, the motivations of people participating in spirituality can be very different. A first distinction should be made between spiritual full-timers, part-timers, and day-trippers, who presumably attach different meanings to the role of spiritual praxis in their lives (see Heelas, *New Age Movement* 118–9). Some participants, such as the meditation leader from the case illustration, invest far more time in spiritual practices, have

more elaborate worldviews, and often feel that they have a personal mission. Others demonstrate a shopping mentality and see spirituality mainly as a leisure activity. Another aspect of participants' motivations is the question of different religious orientations within one context or group, or, strikingly, the presence of participants who have no religious orientation at all. Even when 'non-institutional' Christian spirituality can be described as holistic, this should be understood in a plural sense. A more detailed analysis of religious biographies of participants and leaders is required to interpret these differences.

It is hard to say anything about the future of this new form of religiosity. For the churches, it may be wise to invest in spirituality or other experiential practices, since individual religious experience is perhaps the only thing that will keep believers interested. The situation for Christian spiritual centres is quite different, given that they mostly attract people over 50 years of age with a Christian background. They are mostly people with a religious upbringing, having spent considerable time in the church and remembering a time when religion was not an option, but when it defined one's social identity in a strict and radical sense. They have also experienced the rapid decline of church membership and the questioning of the once sacred authority of tradition. Their choice of spirituality can thus be seen as a stage in a process of religious emancipation, but often also as an attempt to find new inspiration for a faith about which they themselves are no longer so sure. If my observation is right, this means that the future of Christian spiritual centres is not bright, unless they succeed in attracting new and younger target groups.

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NOTES

1. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by the author.
2. This is, of course, my interpretation of this text as an informed participant researcher of Christian spirituality in the Netherlands.

3. The author conducted one year of fieldwork in several Christian spiritual centres and other Christian spiritual enterprises. Fieldwork included participatory research in spiritual courses and retreats, content analysis of documents, as well as 22 biographical and topical interviews with participants and leaders. The research is part of the research programme 'Between Secularisation and Sacralisation' in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
4. These spiritual varieties are all mentioned in Bouwman and Bras.
5. For example, the Ignatiushuis in Amsterdam has organised over 900 courses, training events, and lectures between 1993 and 2003. Subscriptions to these activities numbered nearly 4,400 participants.
6. An example is the influence of Zen Buddhism in Catholic orders in the last three decades. One well-known Zen pioneer was the German Jesuit Hugo LaSalle.
7. Most centres are not self-sufficient and partly financially supported through external funds. Most centres also have support funds and ask for extra voluntary contributions from participants in order to keep their activities affordable. Compared to the alternative spiritual market, Christian spiritual centres charge relatively low prices for their activities, explicitly to keep them accessible to participants with a low income.
8. Bible courses seem to be typical for the IH, whereas in other Christian spiritual centres, this theme has disappeared due to lack of interest from visitors.
9. The World Peace Foundation is an organisation that strives for peace through meditation and teaching.
10. In some Christian spiritual circuits, breath is seen literally as the self, spirit or inspiration. This indicates an even stronger sense of religious individualism, because breathing needs nothing but oxygen and someone who breathes.
11. Paradoxically, verbal expression is an important means to construct consensus about meaning, but this necessarily leads to the exclusion of dissenting voices. It should also be noted that meditation experiences are not easily verbalised and require at least a certain amount of 'emotional literacy'.
12. The meditation meeting is also therapeutic in a more literal sense, for example, when the woman told about her 'television addiction', an association caused by the visualisation of a television image.

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